DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 749 FL 800 649

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TITLE Integrating Reading and Writing into Adult ESL Instruction. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education for Limited-English-Proficient Adults, Washington, DC.; National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-LE-93-01
PUB DATE Mar 93
CONTRACT RI89166001
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *English (Second Language); Instructional Materials; *Literacy; *Literacy Education; Literature; Oral Language; *Reading Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Some of the major reading and writing practices currently in use in adult English-as-a-Second-Language programs are described in this digest. Reading activities for such learners are similar to those used in adult basic education classes. At the beginning level, students dictate stories to the teacher or give an oral account of an experience. These stories become texts for initial reading instruction when written down. Literature-based programs often let students select their own texts. Two series of readers are recommended. Use of materials such as advertisements are suggested as well as part of an effort to keep material relevant. Writing instruction has three purposes: to provide practice in the language, to offer a chance for experimentation, and to allow learners to set their own goals. Process writing provides practice, experimentation and communication with language all in the context of helping a student express his own ideas. It is concluded that reading and writing along with oral language ability should be an aim of adult education for second language learners and native speakers. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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# Integrating Reading and Writing into Adult ESL Instruction

ERIC Digest

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

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FL 800 619

ERIC® Digest

March 1993
EDO-LE-93-01

National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

# Integrating Reading and Writing into Adult ESL Instruction

**by Dan Rabideau**
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Reading and writing play a larger role in language instruction for adult learners today than they have in the recent past. Reading and writing were never completely removed from adult English as a Second Language (ESL) curricula, but during the early 1980s there was a shift toward oral/aural instructional goals and practices. That shift was motivated by learners' needs; many adults had a limited amount of time to spend in a program, and their most immediate need seemed to be oral communication. Some learners came to adult programs with very limited formal schooling, and an oral/aural approach allowed them more opportunities to participate in class. In fact, oral communicative ability is still a primary goal of much adult ESL instruction, but the pendulum is swinging back toward a greater emphasis on reading and writing.

Certainly, the value of oral communicative classroom activities has been demonstrated (Asher, 1982; Savignon, 1983), and no one would endorse abandoning what we know to be effective about those practices. But reading and writing, which are valid instructional activities in themselves, allow for more reflection and contemplation. For example, Tarvin and Al-Arishi (1991) suggest that oral activities in the classroom frequently make reflection and contemplation difficult because of the need for an immediate response. Rodby (1987) found that young adult nonnative English speakers employed by the California Conservation Corps survived for years in the oral English-dominant workplace without ever learning English. They engaged in interactions in English as little as possible and simply made sure they understood and fulfilled the simple directions given by their supervisors. It was not until they began communicating in writing with their teacher and each other in class that they became motivated to learn English and began to acquire it. In informal reading and writing activities, the Corps members were able to work with language that "stood still" (as one of them explained). They could look at it, take time with it, and manipulate it, so they were not so overwhelmed by it.

This digest describes some of the major reading and writing practices currently in use in adult ESL programs (see also Crandall & Peyton, in press, for detailed descriptions of these and other approaches).

## Relating ESL Literacy Instruction to Learner Differences

The ways reading and writing are used in adult ESL programs must be influenced by learners' various language proficiencies, backgrounds, and needs. *Initial literacy* activities are used with learners who have had limited schooling in their first language or whose first language does not have a written form. Bilingual programs for adults offer initial literacy in the native language as well as oral English and English literacy. Some ESL literacy programs provide oral English instruction in a way that is accessible to learners with limited reading ability, as well as initial literacy instruction in English.

*Reading and writing for language acquisition* is used with learners who have completed a basic education in their first language. Reading texts that match learner interests and English proficiency provide learners with comprehensible language input—a chance to learn new vocabulary in context and to see the syntax of the language. Writing allows learners opportunities to experiment with the language and try different constructions to make themselves understood.

*More complex reading and writing tasks* are appropriate for learners with some literacy background in their own language or in English. Many ESL programs now use a process approach to writing instruction, and some regularly publish collections of learner writing (see Peyton, 1991, for an overview). Many of the contributors to *Voices* magazine (a well known publication written by and for adult learners and published by the Invergarry Learning Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia) are taking ESL classes.

## Reading Activities

Reading activities for learners acquiring English as a second language are similar to those used in Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) forms the core of many beginning-level classes for native and nonnative English speakers. Students dictate stories to the teacher or share orally a common experience. When written down by or in collaboration with the teacher, these experiences and stories become texts for initial reading instruction. The stories are accessible because they reflect the language and experience of the learners. This approach is excellent for creating reading texts for beginning-level ESL students whose command of vocabulary and structures in English is limited, as well as for those who are learning to read for the first time. (See Dixon & Nessel, 1983; Rabideau, 1991; Taylor, 1992 for descriptions of the LEA.) D'Annunzio (1990) describes a bilingual version of the LEA. Bilingual tutors take whole-class dictations on a class-selected theme, each learner being encouraged to provide a sentence or two. After the story is completed, it is translated into English by the tutors, and related reading and writing activities are carried out in English and the native language. Learners gradually move from these stories to more extended, expressive writing.

In literature-based programs, learners often select their own reading texts. The most popular are high interest/low reading level books, fiction or non-fiction. Two series of such books particularly appropriate for ESL students are *Hopes and Dreams* (Fearon/Janus/Quercus, Belmont, CA) and *Fitting In* (New Readers Press, Syracuse, NY). Both of these series are fictionalized accounts of the experiences of immigrants, but ESL instructors needn't feel



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limited to works about immigrants. Many of the high/low books written for adult new readers are appropriate for ESL learners as well, although care needs to be taken that cultural concepts and idiomatic expressions are accessible. When the text is written at an accessible level and the story is engaging, readers usually get past unfamiliar words and derive meaning from the context.

Rosow (1990) describes using junk mail and other advertisements as reading texts in a consumer skills class. Whatever they select to read, learners read complete texts that they have chosen, rather than the short, decontextualized passages commonly found in skills books.

### Writing Activities

Process writing, an integral part of most ABE classes, is beginning to play a larger role in ESL classes as well. From a process writing perspective, writing is a communicative act with an intended purpose and audience. The teacher and other learners help the writer find a topic and revise drafts of a written piece until it conveys the intended meaning. Learners are encouraged to take risks and try out new language. As they continue to work to make their meanings clear, learners acquire competence using the style, syntax, grammar, and surface features of the language. Sometimes language rules are taught in teacher-led mini-lessons, but always in the context of expressing the learners' own ideas. In D'Annunzio's (1990) work described above, a learner's attempt to use quotation marks, however inappropriately, demonstrated that she had noticed this convention in the texts she had read. By experimenting with quotation marks in her own writing and through interaction with the teacher and fellow learners, she developed a deeper understanding of the purpose and correct use of that surface feature.

Marc Freedman (1991) has done a small survey of current uses of writing in adult ESL classes. He interviewed 14 ESL practitioners from the Division of Adult and Continuing Education at the City University of New York and several community-based organizations in the New York City area, and found three purposes for writing. The first purpose has to do with *practicing language*:

> Many traditional, workbook-style writing exercises seem predicated on the idea that practicing writing [that is already] correctly formulated...serves the purpose of concretizing learning....While extreme versions of this view have gone the way of the bronto-audio-lingual-saurus, many teachers of beginning/low literacy students stress the need for a great deal of repetition of simplified forms in order for students to build a base upon which to work (p. 11).

The second purpose has to do with *experimenting with language*, encouraging learners to attempt to write things they want to express, even if they are unsure of how to do it. This emphasis does the following:

- It develops an experimental or exploratory approach to language and literacy learning in which the learner plays an active role;
- It allows learners to set their own goals and focus on the language necessary for what they are trying to convey in writing;
- It provides opportunities for learners to explore resources other than the teacher (e.g., their own, perhaps underestimated, knowledge; the knowledge of other students; dictionaries; texts; or their own notes) (p. 12).

The third purpose has to do with *communication*. While an oral utterance is usually based on a preceding utterance or event, has an immediate impact on what happens next, and is of immediate concern to the speaker, many writing activities share none of these characteristics. Interactive writing activities such as letter writing, electronic mail interactions, and dialogue journals (Peyton & Staton, 1991) do have these qualities and thus strengthen the link between written and oral language.

### Conclusion

Adult learners in the United States need to learn oral English, but their needs don't stop there; they are frequently required to read and write in English as well. Whether literacy is a new skill for the learner, or whether the learner is drawing on literacy ability in the first language, reading and writing activities can be developed to meet learner needs. Oral language ability continues to be a primary goal of adult ESL instruction, but reading and writing should also be an aim of adult education for second language learners and native speakers alike.

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An earlier version of this article appeared in *Literacy Harvest* (Winter, 1992), *1*(1), published by the Literacy Assistance Center.


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